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ABSTRACT

Contrary to expectations, self-awareness inhibited reactions to a salient norm of social responsibility in two experiments which tested the hypothesis that directing attention to the self would lead to an increase in helping behavior. The reason, apparently, was that self-awareness interfered with the empathy process. Concerned about themselves and their own problems, the subjects were less willing to help a dependent other. A third experiment examined reactions to a salient norm of reciprocity under conditions that did not promote self-concern. The results of this experiment indicated that self-awareness does promote behavior that is consistent with an internalized standard of equity or reciprocity (that is, helping after receiving some form of help) when subjects are not involved with their own problems. In situations where a person has no basis for self-concern, for instance, a success experience of some kind, self-focused attention does enhance prosocial behavior. Otherwise, self-awareness promotes a state very similar to self-concern in which the person is unwilling to empathize and unlikely to help. (Author/BN)

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Self-Awareness, Self-Concern and Prosocial Behavior

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Self-Awareness, Self-Concern and Prosocial Behavior

I think it is safe to say that most of the research that those of us here who are active in self-awareness theory have been involved with in the last five or six years has in one way or another concerned the concept of behavioral standards. The usual finding of this research has been that self-focused attention promotes behaviors that are consistent with salient standards. Sometimes those standards have come from external sources, such as a group norm or an experimenter's expectation of work output; under these circumstances self-awareness led to an increase in conformity and an increase in work productivity, respectively.

At other times, the standards have been internally-imposed upon the subjects, in the sense that they represented personal values or attitudes that the subject held. For example, the punishment behavior of subjects in research conducted by Chuck Carver, and then the reactions to erotica of subjects in my research were found to be more in line with their relevant personal attitudes when their attention was self-focused. In the erotica study, it was suggested that in this kind of setting, self-awareness works in an inhibitory manner, in that it inhibits behaviors that are discrepant from strongly-held personal standards. People do perform behaviors that are inconsistent with personal standards (such as reading Playboy for a high sex-guilt person), however, these behaviors are unlikely to occur when attention is directed upon the self.

In the current series of studies, similar reasoning was applied to prosocial behaviors. Specifically, in the first study a norm of social responsibility was made salient, and the prediction was straightforward: To the extent that these subjects have internalized a norm of social responsibility, self-focused attention should promote behavior that is consistent with it.

This prediction is the most obvious one to be derived from self-awareness theory, and yet, because of the nature of the behavior involved, it is problematic. The problem centers around the concept of self-concern. According to Berkowitz, a person is said to be in a state of self-concern when they are focusing upon their own problems, to the exclusion of others. In such a state, the ability to empathize is reduced, and helping is unlikely. It seems clear, then, that the attention of a person who is self-concerned is, to some extent, self-directed. Thus, under these circumstances, self-directed attention actually inhibits prosocial behavior. The problem appeared to us to be an empirical one.

Experiments I and II

The first study was run as a test of the social responsibility hypothesis. However, because of the potential problems inherent in the self-focus manipulation, an attempt was made to create a situation that would be relatively free of self-concern. We expected that our subjects had internalized the norm, and thus would respond accordingly, particularly if there was little or no basis for self-concern. The prediction, then, was that the self-aware subjects would help more than the non self-aware subjects.

In the first two experiments self-focused attention was enhanced by means of a tape-recorder playing a tape of the subject's voice. At the beginning of the session, a tape was made of each of the two female subjects reading three different passages. Prior to making this tape, they had been told that one of their tapes would be chosen (randomly) to be played back to both of them, and that they would then be asked questions on one of the passages that was read. When they finished reading a tape was selected, and it was played back to both, thus simultaneously creating own voice (self-aware) and other voice conditions. Finally, the subjects were told that the third passage

had been chosen as the one they would be asked questions on.

While waiting for the third passage to come on, the subjects were asked to read over the request form, which was located in a folder in front of them. The request for help was in the form of a letter from two graduate students in "personality psychology." It indicated that these subjects needed help--as much as they could get--in order to complete their research project. Specifically, subjects were asked to volunteer (without additional credit) for an attraction experiment in which they would match groups of pictures of husbands and wives. At the bottom of the page they were to indicate how many groups of pictures they would be willing to rate (they were asked to do as many as they could, and each group supposedly took about 5 minutes). An appropriate amount of time was allotted for the subjects to fill out the form, and then the experiment was terminated. The primary dependent variable was the proportion of subjects volunteering to rate at least one group of pictures in the self-aware and non self-aware conditions.

Results

The results, which are presented in Table 1, came as a surprise to us.

Insert Table 1 about here

Although we thought that the self-focus manipulation might engender some self-concern in the subjects, and thus inhibit helping, the significant reduction in the self-aware condition was certainly not expected. For this reason, we attempted to replicate this finding in a second experiment, using both male and female subjects.

The design of the second experiment was identical to that of the first, with a couple of minor changes (which were intended to increase the overall

amount of helping) and with one major change: After filling out the request form, this time subjects worked on an anagram/word task. This task was intended to find out what thoughts were salient for the subjects at the time of the request.

The helping data of this experiment are presented in Table 2. Again,

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Insert Table 2 about here

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it can be seen that self-focused attention had an inhibitory effect upon helping behavior, as the subjects in the own voice condition helped less than those in the other voice condition. There were no sex differences in the data.

At this point the implication seemed fairly clear to us, that the self-focus manipulation was apparently promoting some self-concern in our subjects, which was interfering with their helping behavior. The third study was intended to test this hypothesis directly. Before describing that experiment, however, I would like to discuss the anagram task of the second experiment.

After responding to the request form, but while the tape was still playing, the subjects were asked to work on an anagram task. Their job was to read over a sentence printed at the top of the page, and then make up as many new English words as they could, using only the letters appearing in the sentence. Two sentences were presented to them in random order, and they had 90 seconds to work on each one. The sentences, which dealt with helping values were: "Helping others is a waste of my time," and "I am a charitable person who helps others." The reasoning behind this task was based on an experiment by Valerie Geller and Phil Shaver, in which they employed the Stroop color-word test. They found that self-aware subjects had more difficulty than non self-aware subjects in identifying the colors of self-related words. They reasoned that the difficulty was due to the fact that the self-aware subjects

were concerned with self-related thoughts, and consequently had trouble with some of the words. Our anagram task was quite similar. In order to perform well on this kind of a task, it is best to ignore what the sentence actually says, and just look at it as a group of unrelated letters. Thus, those subjects who are preoccupied with the meanings of the sentences should have the most trouble making the transformations. We expected that the self-aware subjects would be most concerned with helping values, and would therefore have the most difficulty.

This was not the case, however. An anlysis of variance (see Table 3) of

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Insert Table 3 about here

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the total number of letters used correctly revealed no differences between the self-aware and non self-aware groups (an analysis of the number of words used correctly produced identical results.) In other words, there was no indication that the self-aware subjects were thinking about the norm. For this reason an internal analysis was performed on these data, in order to determine if there were any differences between the helpers and the non-helpers in performance on the task. This analysis did produce some results; in particular, a significant interaction between self-awareness and the additional factor of helped/did not help. It can be seen in the table that the subjects who had (by far) the most difficulty were the subjects who had helped, and who were self-aware.

What this data suggests, is that a percentage (47%) of the self-focused subjects were thinking about helping values when they worked on the task. The majority, however, appeared not to be concerned with thoughts of helping at the time. In summary, then, there was no evidence in the first two experiments of a pervasive social responsibility norm. Self-focused subjects helped less in

both experiments, and, except for a small number of subjects in the second experiment, they apparently were not really concerned about helping norms.

The third study was intended to determine if self-concern was, in some way, responsible for the reduction in helping behavior evidenced in the first two experiments. To test this self-concern hypothesis, both self-focused attention and self-concern were manipulated; in this case self-awareness was manipulated by means of a mirror.

Male subjects were run in this experiment together with a female confederate. Self-concern was reduced for some of the subjects by giving them false feedback concerning an analogy test that they had taken. The low self-concern subjects were told that they had done quite well compared with others taking the test, whereas the self-concern subjects were told they had done relatively poorly. After receiving the feedback the subject and the confederate were taken into another cubicle hallway where they were to work on a second experimental task.

This task involved making a tape-recording of their answers to a number of biographical questions.

At this point, the pair of "subjects" was informed that since there was only one recorder, one person would have to wait while the other person made his/her tape first. In each case, the female was asked to go first, and the subject was asked to sit in an adjacent cubicle and wait for her. Located on a desk in front of the subject was a large mirror which faced the subject in the self-aware condition or faced away from him in the non self-aware condition. After explaining the operation of the tape-recorder, the experimenter said he would be back in about 10 minutes, and then he left.

While the subject waited, a minor emergency occurred in the confederate's cubicle, as she began to have some (obvious) problems with the recorder. In summary, the situation was the following: The subject was sitting in his cubicle,

facing the mirror, when it became clear that the "other subject" was in distress. The DV was simply how long it took the subject to go into the confederate's cubicle, and offer aid.

Because of the heterogeneity of variance, a log transformation was performed on the latency scores; the results of this transformed variable are presented in Table 4. The means were in the expected direction, and the interaction between self-awareness and self-concern was significant. When self-concern

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Insert Table 4 about here

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was reduced, self-focused attention led to an increase in helping behavior, as indicated by the significant reduction in latency to help.

Discussion

A rather complex relationship was demonstrated in this research between self-focused attention and helping. It was also a relationship that was unexpected.

To begin with, there was no evidence in the three studies that subjects were responding to an internalized social responsibility norm. Self-awareness actually inhibited a behavior that was thought to be consistent with a salient norm. In this regard, a number of previous researchers (e.g., Staub, 1972, and, to some extent, Berkowitz, 1972) have suggested that the social responsibility norm may <u>not</u> be an internalized standard of behavior for most people. The present study provides further evidence of this. In fact, in light of previous research demonstrating that self-awareness does promote behavior that is consistent with personal standards, it would appear that the subjects in this study had not internalized this particular standard. While most people do verbally adhere to the norm, it appears that in many situations they choose to ignore

or overlook it.

A small group of self-aware subjects did help in both experiments, however. The anagram data of the second experiment suggest that they were at least thinking about, and presumably responding to a responsibility norm. Individual differences, like this, in responses to helping norms have been demonstrated in a series of studies by Shalom Schwartz (1973, 1977). He suggests that some people are more likely to help than others, because they tend to assign responsibility to themselves (rather than deny responsibility) for the welfare of others. It is quite possible that the helpers in this study were high on Schwartz's "AR" dimension. This would also be consistent with self-awareness theory--self-focused attention facilitates standard-consistent behavior, providing that the standard has been internalized.

For the rest of the self-aware subjects in these studies, the responsibility norm had little or no effect upon their behavior, unless their self-concern had been temporarily reduced. Self-concern apparently plays an important role in the inhibition-process demonstrated in these experiments. Why this is the case in not entirely clear; however, a possible explanation may be found within self-awareness theory. Duval and Wicklund (1972) originally proposed that self-awareness is, by nature, an aversive state. The reason is that self-awareness tends to promote a self-evaluation process, in which the person focuses upon their own shortcomings, or personal problems. This description of the state of self-awareness is very similar to that proposed by Berkowitz in describing self-concern. As Berkowitz suggests, a person who is self-concerned is not likely to remember the helpfulness norm, and is thus unlikely to help. This is consistent with the data of the second experiment, which indicated that most of the self-focused subjects were not thinking about helping norms. It also appeared to be the case that they were not thinking

about the person who asked them for help. While this seems clear given the pattern of helping responses in the first two studies, it is suggested that future research be conducted in this area in order to examine more closely the relationship between self-focused attention and empathy.

At any rate, the three studies together indicate that the relationship between self-awareness and salient behavioral standards is not as simple as was first expected. In situations where a person has no basis at all for self-concern, i.e., after a success experience of some kind, self-focused attention does enhance prosocial behavior. Otherwise, self-awareness apparently promotes a state very similar to self-concern, in which the person is unwilling to empathize and unlikely to help.

Table 1

Proportion of Helpers - Experiment I

	Own Voice	Other Voice	$X^2(1) = 3.93$
Helped	3	10	$p < .05$
Did Not Help	19	12	

Table 2

Proportion of Helpers - Experiment II

	Own Voice	Other Voice	$X^2(1) = 3.19$
Helped	20	27	$p < .08$
Did Not Help	23	14	

Combination of X^2 values from Experiments I and II = $X^2(2) = 7.12$, $p < .02$.

Table 3

Mean Number of Letters Used Correctly in the Two Anagrams (Experiment II)

	Own Voice	Other Voice
Helped	29.6	46.2
Did Not Help	40.1	38.1

$F(1, 75) = 8.09$, $p < .01$

Table 4

Helping Latency[a] (Experiment III)

	Mirror	No Mirror
Self-Concern	1.91	1.80
No Self-Concern	1.69	1.94

F (1, 64) = 5.77, $p < .02$

[a]Means are $\log_{10}$ latency, N = 18 per cell.